

## AFTER THE HANGING.

The Ghastly Aftermath of a Public Execution.

At eleven o'clock on a certain June day a great crowd of gaping Mississippi country folk thronged the sloping sides of a hollow that, with the exception of a natural outlet on one side, converged to a small circular plat in the centre. Upon this spot had been erected a frame-work of beams, posts, braces, a platform, and a trap-door. It was the gallows—that grim monument to the majesty of the law. The hollow was a vast earthen bowl; the gallows, a lump of sugar in the bottom; the crowd, a swarm of prowling ants that crawled around like a pestilence.

For be it known that this was the first execution that had ever occurred in Kemper County.

If there is one thing more entertaining than a hanging *per se*, it is the variety of effect produced by the ghastly spectacle upon the faces and manner of the assembled witnesses. The majority were present because they had never seen a hanging; others went to gratify the natural vengeance of outraged humanity; a moiety went in the interest of "science," hoping to hear the snapping caused by the sundering of the spinal ligament.

They assisted the trembling, faltering footsteps of the victim up a ladder constructed with the finest ingenuity of awkwardness; stood him on the trap like a wooden soldier that was to be shot down with tin cannon and cork ball; and with exquisitely polite condensation, invited him to feed the assembled multitude on the philosophic loaves and fishes of the hangman's prestidigitation. And yet no tickets had been sold to that rare banquet.

A pretty, dimpled, rosy lass from the country—barefoot, and arrayed in a yellow calico dress and a white sun-bonnet, and pervaded by an odor of fresh butter and milk, and wild violets and innocence—stared horror-stricken at the awful preparations. The bright roses soon fled, and refused longer to play hide-and-seek with the dimples; and the large blue eyes overflowed with tears.

The cap was drawn; the loop was adjusted. The girl buried her face in her gaunt old mother's bosom, and gasped:

"Are they nearly ready?"

"Very nearly."

"Who is that talking?"

"The priest."

"Praying?"

"Yes."

There was a pause.

"What are they doing now, mother?"

"They are tying the man's feet and hands."

"Do they tie his hands before or behind?"

"Neither; to his sides."

"Oh, mother, mother!"

"What, my child?" and the older voice began to quaver.

"Poor fellow! poor fellow!"

The girl sobbed pitifully. She buried her face deeper, and clung closer to her mother's neck.

"What are they doing now, mother?"

"The sheriff is getting down."

"O, m! Can I hear it, mother?"

"What, my dear?"

"When it drops."

"I think you can," and the older heart throbbed wildly.

"What are they doing now, mother?"

"The sheriff has a long, bright knife."

"What for?"

"To cut the string," so faintly that it is a whisper.

"And now, mother?"

"My—God! my—child! I don't know—I can't—look—any—longer!"

[They say that in the course of events the girl married and became a mother. Quite natural. They further assert that her first-born came into the world dead, with its neck unnaturally stretched, and its head bent far to one side.]

There was another interesting group, composed of boys between the ages of four-and-a-half and seven years. One was a negro named Tony, six years old, black as tar, homely as an ape. The others were all white. One of these, "Buck," was a chubby boy of five, with freckled face, red cheeks, and white hair. These two and the five or six others were standing or sitting in every imaginable posture indicative of awe, interest, and fear. Tony was dressed simply in a pair of his father's pantaloons cut off at the knees. Consequently the waist-band came quite under his arms, dispensing with the necessity of a shirt; and the buttons in front were connected with those behind by short strings, that served as suspenders. He was quite small and weazened. Buck, on the contrary, was large and strong; his general manner was nearly like that belonging to the advanced years of a patriarch.

After the body had been placed in a coffin, Tony wriggled to his feet and swaggered pompously up to Buck, and burying his skinny arms deep in his vest pockets, demanded:

"Wa what yer suckin yer thumb fer?"

Buck snatched the thumb from his mouth, and looked ashamed. Tony pursued his advantage by remarking, tauntingly:

"You was skyerd, too!"

"I wasn't," protested Buck.

"Yes you was, wh-when he chopped de string!"

"I wasn't; but you was, though."

"H-how?"

"Sen you."

"Seed me?"

The white boy nodded. He never wasted words.

"Seed me, d d yer?"

Buck did not dignify a second nod.

"Wnat yer see?" persisted Tony.

The white boy took the thumb from his mouth—it had again found its way there—and answered:

"You got pale."

The absurdity of the idea was so apparent that even the slow penetration of the little black imp was not long in detecting it.

"Me got pale?"

"No, the thumb prevented utterance."

"You knows?"

"Seed me?"

A nod.

"H-h-how kin yer see me git pale wb-wh-when I's black?"

Now, kin yer answer dat?"

Another nod.

"Y'ever seed er nigger git pale?"

Nod.

"H-how?"

"You know them little red streaks in the white o' your eyes?"

"Yas."

"That's how you tell when a nigger's pale."

"H-how?"

"Cause the streaks turns white, an' you can't see 'em."

Having delivered himself of this startling physiological truth, the young man rose to his feet, and he and the negro trotted off to regain their companions, who were already several rods away, deep in a discussion of the scene they had just witnessed.

"I wonder if it hurt him."

"Course it did!"

"How do you know?"

"Didn't you see him doin' his shoulders this way, and sorter reachin' out his feet before him?"

"Why, I've seen 'em do like that in the circus."

"What do you think about it, Buck?"

"Nothin'."

"Would you like to be hung?"

Buck shook his head.

"Why?"

"Hurts."

"How do you know?"

"Dunno."

"I wouldn't mind it!" exclaimed the boastful Tony.

A peculiar and mischievous look came into Buck's face.

He asked Tony:

"You wouldn't?"

"No! Shaw! why doan my daddy heff me up by my hade clar o' de groun' mos' ev'ry day, to see London?"

"Don't it hurt?"

"No!"

"What does they hang people for, Tony?" queried a cross-eyed little wretch.

"Wh-why, ter see London, course!"

"What, with a rope?"

"Oh, er rope!"

"Yes."

"Waal, doan yer know?"

"No."

"Den I ain't er-gwine to ter yer!"

Buck had developed an idea.

"Le's hang Tony," he said.

The proposition was hailed with delight.

But numerous obstacles presented themselves—there was no material for building a scaffold, no carpenter's tools: Buck solved the problem by suggesting a tree. There was no rope: Buck stole an old, partially decayed clothes-line.

They soon found an appropriate spot for the execution. It was at the head of a deep and shady ravine, walled in on three sides by precipitous bluffs. Ascent or descent was extremely perilous, as it could be accomplished only by clinging to the stems and roots of bushes that lined the walls in many places. The boys clambered down, and discovered a tree on which could be successfully tested the efficacy of capital punishment. It was a stunted, crooked magnolia, leaning far to one side, and having a branch that ran out horizontally, about eight feet from the ground. They danced around the tree in the highest enjoyment of the delightful preparations, which were conducted by Buck, Tony, and two or three others—none more happy than Tony himself. They tied one end of the rope to the limb, and secured the other around Tony's neck.

A tremendous obstacle now obtruded itself. They had no trap. The improvised gallows was a failure.

"Now, look-a-hyar," said Tony, "I don't want ter be h-hung in dis byar style. Ef I ain't er-gwine ter drap, dey ain't no fun."

"You can jump off'n the limb," suggested Buck.

This solution of the difficulty was received with the most demonstrative joy. Tony sat upon the limb, the rope around his neck.

"All right, Tony," said one of the leaders; "but wait till you say everything. Now, make a speech, you know."

Tony grinned and cleared his throat.

"Ladies 'n gembles!"

"There ain't no ladies, Tony."

"Waal, doan I has ter say h-hit anyway? Ladies 'n gembles! I wants ter 'dress yer wid er few las' words. I's er mighty big sinner. A-hem! I wh-what did he say?"

"Talked about his mother."

"Oh, yas! An' wh-when I was er little bit o' chile, dest about so high, an' use ter go an' git de old man switches—"

"Yas. An' she would tof me ter be er mighty good chile, an' min' her wh-when she holler at me; an' ef I didn't git down awn dem marrer-bones 'n say dem prayers quick, she'd make er fio'-cloth out'n me, an' tie me ter de well-bucket fer er sinker; an'—an'—"

"Advisin' 'em, you know."

"An' ef yer ever does anything wrong, an' dey catches yer 'n hung yer, wh-why, den, look out! Now, wh-who's er-gwine ter pray?"

But the prayer was dispensed with, as was also the blind-folding and the tying. One boy armed himself with a stick, which he made believe was a knife, and gave Tony particular instructions to drop at the moment the knife struck the imaginary cord that held the imaginary trigger. The boy then looked around solemnly, made a grand sweep with his arm, and, with a strong blow upon the trunk of the tree, sprung the trap.

True to the working perfection of the machinery, Tony was launched into space.

A strange and unaccountable thing had happened. Tony found himself sprawling upon the ground. He scrambled to his feet with a look of triumph that ill-accommoded with the astonishment visible in the faces of the spectators. They had committed the error of allowing too much rope for the distance.

"H-bit doan hurt!" exclaimed Tony.

"Cause you ain't hung," Buck quietly remarked.

This abashed Tony, when he had realized the situation. He crawled upon the limb again, and they contracted the length of the rope.

All ready again. The knife fell.

Tony slipped from the tree; the rope tightened, stopped the upper part of his body with a jerk, and then snapped and threw him violently upon the ground. He slowly and with difficulty raised his head and looked around, as though his neck was stiffened painfully with a cold, his eyes staring as if he had seen a hideous spectre, his mouth drawn with pain, and the tears trickling down his cheeks.

"Confound that rope!" exclaimed a boy.

Buck regarded Tony silently.

"What's the matter, Tony?" asked another boy, as he noticed the remarkable expression in the negro's face.

Tony was sitting on the ground, carefully feeling his neck all around, and was unable to speak for the suppressed sobs that choked him. He rose to his feet, looking ruefully about, the boys enjoying his discomfiture immoderately.

"Le's try it ag'in," said Buck.

"No, you don't!" screamed the colored boy, with a determination the firmness of which could not be doubted. He was as fierce as he was frightened, and occupied himself with rearranging his suspenders, which were on the point of slipping from his shoulders.

"Why, Tony?"

"Yer plays too rough. Dat's why, now!"

"Did it hurt?"

"Course it did!" he said, with a look of contempt.

They insisted; Tony refused. One little fellow caught forcible hold, but Tony threw him off and bounded into the brush. They pursued him, captured him, and brought him back, crying and struggling fiercely. Finally they succeeded, after the greatest difficulty, in lifting him from the ground, while Buck could climb the tree and tie the rope. There was no ceremony about the affair then. The work was done silently and in dead earnest. The unfortunate victim yelled, but the boys were not to be cheated out of the fruits of the first grand lesson they had learned in the economy of government, the protection of society. They had seen a thing about which a great popular commotion had been raised—a simple thing: a beam, a rope, and a man. What prevents a frequent repetition of this phantasmagoria from the magic-lantern of the law? Surely not the popular taste. It is true that the magic-lantern is, as it were, a species of reserved and exalted privilege; but the slide on which the ghastly picture is painted can be removed, and utilized in an improvised magic-lantern sometimes vulgarly called a mob. But this, also, has a flame, a reflector, and a magnifying lens. It answers for all practical purposes. It is an off-spring of necessity.

The rope was at length securely tied. The cries of the unwilling victim were suddenly checked, as his weight was gradually allowed to fall upon the rope, strangling him. They were determined that a sudden jerk should not again frustrate their plans. Throwing his liberated hands wildly about, he clutched a boy by the hair, and made him yell with pain. It required strong efforts to release him. Then they all withdrew to a short distance.

Not a sound of any kind escaped the hanging child. The boys looked on silently, and with grim satisfaction. He vainly endeavored to reach up and catch the rope that was choking out his life; but there seemed to be a weight upon his arms, and he could raise them no higher than his shoulders. He kicked to the right and to the left, and squirmed and twisted. The knot was behind his neck, and the rope fell directly across the windpipe and great arteries. The boys watched the contortions of his face with absorbing interest, and a few became somewhat pale with an excitement tinged with anxiety; but they possessed too much stoicism to betray their feelings by any overt act, while the younger boys—and especially Buck—looked on with such calm courage.

"I wonder if it hurts him much?" queried a boy. There was no reply.

Buck, on being asked the question, nodded; and, with his thumb in his mouth, never removed his gaze from the suspended Tony.

"Well, we'll take him down after awhile. I wonder why he don't say something, Buck?"

"Can't."

"Why?"

But Buck merely shook his head, and said nothing.

The poor little hanging wretch grew more and more quiet as the moments flew by. His teeth were shut close, but his lips were slightly parted, and his eyes stared with a dumb, beseeching, horrifying agony. After the lapse of a few minutes his struggles ceased, and the body turned slowly from side to side. Then there was a slight shivering; the eyes rolled upward, and became fixed.

Said a boy: "I'll bet you he won't go around any more, blowing about it's not hurting him."

Buck looked at the speaker, and then at the swinging body. He told them to hold Tony while he climbed the tree to untie the knot. They did so; but through a little carelessness and ignorance they allowed the body to lunge to one side, and it fell to the ground like a log. They stared at it, and a boy asked:

"Why don't you get up, Tony?"

"What are you doing 'yer eyes that way for?" asked another.

"Ain't he still?" remarked a third.

"Do you think he is putting on?"

"I don't know. Here, you take hold of that other arm, and help me pull him up. Tony!"

He was lying on his back. They raised him by the arms to a sitting posture; but as soon as they released him he toppled to one side and forward, and one of the eyes was buried in the dirt. The boys were thoroughly alarmed. They felt that something awful had happened, but they were ignorant of its nature.

"What's the matter with him?"

No answer.

"Does anybody know?"

Still no answer.

"Do you, Buck?"

A quiet nod.

"What is it?"

"Dead."

OAKLAND, March 10, 1880.

W. C. MORROW.